



FROM ANCIENT EPICS TO MODERN NARRATIVES: CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE'S ENGAGEMENT WITH RAMAYANA AND MAHABHARATA

Dr Mrinalini P. Thaker

Associate Professor, KSN Kansagara Mahila College, Rajkot (Gujarat)

ABSTRACT

The paper explores how contemporary literature has engaged with and reimagined the ancient Sanatan(Hindu) epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata. The paper delves into the transformative journey of these timeless tales from their traditional forms to the diverse and innovative narratives found in modern literature. The paper also discusses how modern adaptations or retellings of Ramayana and Mahabharata in contemporary literature serve several purposes, with special reference to four contemporary works namely, "Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta" by Amish Tripathi, "Ramayana: The Game of Life" a book series written by Shubha Vilas and "Sita: Warrior of Mithila" by Amish Tripathi and "The Palace of Illusions" by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni.

KEYWORDS: #Ramanayana #Mahabharat #ModernNarratives #Contemporary #AmishTripathi #Shubha Vilas #Amish Tripathi #ChitraBanerjeeDivakaruni

INTRODUCTION

Ramayana and Mahabharata are two ancient Sanatan(Hindu) epics that have had a significant influence on Bhartia(Indian) culture, civilization, tradition and storytelling. Over the years, there have been numerous modern adaptations and retellings of these ancient epics, each offering unique perspectives and interpretations. Ramayana and Mahabharata have inspired writers from all over the world, and there are many translated epic works based on them. Both epics have been adapted into modern-day literature, movies, and TV shows. These epics continue to capture the imagination of writers, even in the present day. Whether it be a desire to connect with cultural heritage, a fascination with timeless themes and characters, or a means of exploring and commenting on contemporary issues, the paper delves into the motivations that drive authors to revisit these ancient epics.

Well as such the motivation behind contemporary authors' engagement with Ramayana and Mahabharata is multifaceted and can vary from writer to writer. Both epics are deeply deep-rooted in Sanatan (Hindu) culture and serve as a source of national and cultural identity. Many contemporary authors feel a strong connection to these epics and seek to explore and celebrate their rich heritage. They engage with these ancient texts as a means of preserving and revitalizing cultural traditions, ensuring that the stories continue to resonate with future generations.

Despite being ancient texts, the themes and moral dilemmas presented in Ramayana and Mahabharata remain relevant to contemporary society. Accordingly, authors are motivated by a desire to explore the timeless human struggles and conflicts depicted in the epics, such as the nature of power, the complexities of human relationships, and the pursuit of dharma (moral duty). They recognize the universality of these themes and seek to translate them into narratives that speak to modern readers. While some contemporary authors engage with the epics as a means of subverting or deconstructing traditional narratives. They challenge the conventional interpretations and representations found in ancient texts, particularly regarding gender roles, social hierarchies, and moral absolutes. By reimagining characters and plotlines, these authors offer alternative perspectives and explore the complexities and nuances that may have been overlooked in traditional retellings.

Ramayana and Mahabharata have also been interpreted as allegories for societal and political issues. Thus many contemporary authors are engaged with these epics as a vehicle for social and political commentary, using the stories as metaphors to address contemporary challenges and injustices. They employ familiar characters and narrative frameworks to shed light on issues such as caste discrimination, gender inequality, corruption, and abuse of power. While for some authors, engaging with the epics presents an artistic challenge and an opportunity for creative experimentation. They may be drawn to the complex characters, intricate plotlines, and epic scope of the narratives, which provide a rich canvas for their imagination. By adapting and reimagining Ramayana and Mahabharata, these authors push the boundaries of storytelling and explore new literary techniques, structures, and styles.

It is important to note that these motivations are not mutually exclusive, and authors may be driven by a combination of factors. The motivation behind contemporary authors' engagement with Ramayana and Mahabharata reflects their connections to the epics, their creative aspirations, and their desire to explore the timeless themes and cultural significance embedded within these ancient texts.

Contemporary authors employ a range of forms and approaches in their engagement with the epics. These forms and approaches can vary from faithful retellings that adhere closely to the original narrative structure to more experimental and imaginative reimaginings. Many contemporary authors choose to retell the epics faithfully, staying true to the original storyline and characters. These retellings often focus on bringing the ancient tales to a modern audience, presenting the narratives in a more accessible and contemporary language while maintaining the essence of the original text. Authors may add their interpretations and perspectives, but the core plot and characters remain largely intact. Some authors take a subversive approach by challenging or subverting traditional narratives and interpretations found in the epics. They may reimagine characters, invert power dynamics, or question established moral codes. These adaptations aim to shed light on overlooked perspectives, challenge societal norms, and offer alternative readings of the epics. Such approaches often result in thought-provoking and unconventional narratives that challenge readers' preconceptions.

As such contemporary authors may also choose to focus on specific characters from the epics and develop their stories in-depth. They delve into the complexities of these characters, providing psychological depth and exploring their motivations, conflicts, and personal journeys. By giving voice to lesser-known characters or reimagining the perspectives of well-known characters, authors offer fresh insights into the epics' themes and explore the human experiences within the larger narrative. Simultaneously some authors set their narratives within the broader context of historical fiction or blend mythic elements with realistic settings. They reimagine the epics by incorporating historical events, cultural contexts, or geographical landscapes to ground the stories in a specific time and place. This approach provides a fusion of mythology and historical realism, adding depth and authenticity to the narratives. Accordingly, Contemporary authors often experiment with different narrative structures and techniques to engage with the epics. They may employ nonlinear storytelling, multiple perspectives, or fragmented narratives to create a fresh reading experience.

For example, Devdutt Pattanaik in his "Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana" presents a faithful retelling of Ramayana while incorporating his own interpretations and illustrations. The book stays true to the original storyline and characters, making the epic accessible to modern readers through simplified language and vibrant visuals. While Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's "The Palace of Illusions", Mahabharata is retold from the perspective of Draupadi, offering a subversive and feminist reinterpretation of the epic. Divakaruni challenges traditional gender roles, explores Draupadi's agency, and critiques the patriarchal society depicted in the original text.

On the other hand Anand Neelakantan's "Asura: Tale of the Vanquished" focuses on the character of Ravana from Ramayana. Neelakantan provides an alternative narrative, portraying Ravana as a complex and sympathetic character rather than a mere villain. The novel explores Ravana's motivations, delves into his inner conflicts, and questions the traditional portrayal of good versus evil. Whereas, "The Forest of Enchantments" by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni blends mythic realism with historical fiction, retelling Ramayana through the eyes of Sita. The novel incorporates historical and cultural contexts, depicting the epic within the framework of ancient Bharat (India) and exploring the challenges faced by Sita as a woman at that time.

At the same time, "Ajaya: Roll of the Dice" by Anand Neelakantan, presents a unique perspective on Mahabharata, focusing on the Kauravas and presenting them as flawed heroes rather than villains. While "Yajnaseni: The Story of Draupadi" by Pratibha Ray, delves into the character of Draupadi and explores her thoughts, emotions, and experiences throughout the epic. Moreover Kavita Kané "Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen", offers a portrayal of Karna's life and the story of his wife, Uruvi, shedding light on their relationship and the complexities surrounding their roles in Mahabharata. Whereas Gurcharan Das's "The Difficulty of Being Good", is not a novel in the traditional sense, but a non-fiction work that examines the moral and ethical dilemmas faced by the characters in Mahabharata and draws lessons for contemporary life.

These novels provide fresh perspectives, explore different characters in depth, and offer imaginative interpretations of the events and themes present in Mahabharata. These examples highlight the diverse forms and approaches taken by contemporary authors to engage with the epics. Whether, through faithful retellings, subversive adaptations, character-centric perspectives, historical fiction, or experimental structures, these authors bring fresh perspectives, challenge traditional interpretations, and offer innovative ways of experiencing and understanding the ancient Indian epics.

As a consequence, contemporary authors engage with epics in creative ways that allow them to explore new themes and perspectives while also preserving the core texts. Thus modern adaptations or retellings of Ramayana and Mahabharata in contemporary literature serve several purposes. Firstly, they provide a fresh perspective on the stories and characters, which can be appealing to readers who are familiar with the original texts. Many authors have adapted the storyline of these epics to create a new and innovative retelling, while others have written the story from the point of view of one of the characters. Secondly, retellings can make these ancient stories more accessible to modern readers who may find the original texts difficult to read or understand. Thirdly, by updating the stories and characters to reflect contemporary issues and concerns, modern retellings can make these ancient epics more relevant to modern readers. Fourthly, retelling can help preserve these ancient stories and ensure that they continue to be passed down through generations. Fifthly, retelling can be a form of artistic expression, allowing authors to put their own spin on the stories and characters. Finally, modern comic book adaptations of Ramayana and Mahabharata have been produced and marketed to appeal to younger audiences.

Overall, modern adaptations or retellings of Ramayana and Mahabharata serve a variety of purposes, from making these ancient stories more accessible to preserving them for future generations. Additionally, modern retellings of these epics can be used as a tool for cultural education, helping readers learn about the history and tradition of Bharat. By updating the stories and characters to reflect contemporary issues and concerns, modern retellings can also make these ancient epics more relevant to modern readers, encouraging them to engage with the stories and think critically about their themes and messages. Furthermore, modern retellings can be a form of artistic expression, allowing authors and artists to put their own spin on the stories and characters while still staying true to the essence of the original texts. Overall, modern adaptations or retellings of Ramayana and Mahabharata serve as a bridge between ancient mythology and contemporary culture, making these timeless stories accessible and relevant to new generations of readers.

Modern adaptations and retellings of Ramayana and Mahabharata in contemporary literature have gained significant popularity and relevance for a multitude of reasons. These ancient Indian epics hold a special place in Bharat (Indian) culture, tradition and mythology, and adapting them allows contemporary authors to connect with a broader audience while preserving their cultural heritage. One of the main reasons for the continued interest in these adaptations is the presence of universal themes within the epics. The epics explore profound concepts such as duty, honour, love, sacrifice, and the complexities of the human condition. These themes transcend time and culture, resonating with readers across different eras and backgrounds. By retelling these stories in a contemporary context, authors can make these timeless lessons accessible and relatable to modern readers. Additionally, modern adaptations provide an opportunity for interpretation and exploration of the original texts. Authors can explore deeper into the psychology and motivations of the characters, highlight lesser-known stories or perspectives, and shed light on social, political, or ethical issues that are relevant to contemporary society. By reimagining the epics, writers can bring a fresh perspective to the narratives, inviting readers to engage in critical thinking and contemplation.

Literary experimentation is another factor that drives the popularity of modern adaptations. Authors often use Ramayana and Mahabharata as a canvas for innovation and creativity. They employ diverse narrative techniques, adopt alternative viewpoints, and blend elements of different genres to create unique storytelling experiences. This experimentation allows for a fresh interpretation of the epics, captivating readers with unexpected twists and engaging narrative structures. Moreover, modern adaptations serve as a bridge between generations, enabling younger audiences to connect with these ancient texts. By presenting the stories in contemporary settings or using modern language and references, authors make the epics more accessible and relatable to younger readers. This ensures that the wisdom and teachings embedded in these epics continue to be passed down through the generations.

Well, the global appeal of Ramayana and Mahabharata contributes to the rise of modern adaptations. These epics offer profound insights into human nature and moral dilemmas, which resonate with readers worldwide. By adapting these stories in contemporary literature, they can reach a broader global audience, fostering cross-cultural understanding and appreciation for Indian mythology and literature. Accordingly, it seems that modern adaptations and retellings of Ramayana and Mahabharata in contemporary literature serve multiple purposes. They make these ancient epics culturally relevant, explore universal themes, allow for interpretation and exploration, encourage literary experimentation, bridge the generation gap, and appeal to a global audience. By breathing new life into these timeless tales, contemporary adaptations ensure that the wisdom and teachings of Ramayana and Mahabharata continue to inspire and resonate with readers in the modern world.

One of the most popular adaptations is found in "Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta" (2019) by Amish Tripathi, which presents a fresh perspective on the life of the antagonist Ravana, exploring his motivations, struggles, and his own version of events from Ramayana. The book chronicles the life of Raavan until the time he kidnaps Sita. It is the third book in the Ram Chandra series and has received mixed reviews, with some praising it for its eloquent yet simple language, while others criticize it for its lack of nuance and emotional depth. The plot of the book is intriguing and engaging, with a fresh perspective on the life of Raavan.

As such, Amish Tripathi was motivated to write "Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta" by a combination of factors that drove his creative vision and storytelling. One of the primary motivations was to delve into the character of Raavan, who is traditionally portrayed as the antagonist in Ramayana. He wanted to provide a more nuanced and multidimensional portrayal of Raavan, exploring his complexities, motivations, and inner struggles. By humanizing Raavan and presenting his perspective, Tripathi aimed to challenge the traditional black-and-white perception of characters. Well, another motivation behind the book was Tripathi's inclination to question assumptions and challenge established norms. Through "Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta," he sought to challenge the simplistic notions of good and evil by presenting the story from Raavan's point of view. By doing so, he aimed to encourage readers to question their preconceived notions and explore the shades of grey in characters and situations.

Tripathi's writing style often involves intertwining parallel narratives and subplots, and "Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta" allowed him to explore Raavan's story while maintaining connections to the broader narrative of Ramayana. This approach provided an opportunity to add depth and complexity to the epic by examining the events and circumstances that shaped Raavan's character. Furthermore, Tripathi's work often incorporates social commentary and addresses contemporary issues. Moreover, he explored themes such as power, ambition, leadership, and the nature of evil. By weaving these themes into Raavan's story, Tripathi aimed to offer reflections on the human condition and provoke thought about these universal themes in readers.

Furthermore, as an author known for his retellings and rewiring and readings epics, Tripathi wanted to continue his exploration of ancient epics in a contemporary and engaging manner. Thus "Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta" provided him with the opportunity to bring a fresh perspective to the characters and events of Ramayana, furthering his aim of reimagining and retelling tales for a modern audience. Thus the motivation to write "Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta" stemmed from his desire to explore Raavan's character, challenge assumptions, weave parallel narratives, provide social commentary, and continue his exploration of retellings. By doing so, he aimed to engage readers, provoke thought, and offer a new perspective on the ancient epic of Ramayana.

As such the characters in the book are well-developed and have distinct personalities. Raavan, in particular, is portrayed as a man of contrasts, with brutal violence and scholarly knowledge. However, some characters lack depth and are not given enough space to grow and evolve. Furthermore, the language used in the book is a perfect blend of eloquence and simplicity. The author has done an excellent job of making the story accessible to readers of all levels. However, at times, the writing feels repetitive and lacks the poetic quality that one would expect from a book based on mythology. The climax of the book is well-executed and ties up all loose ends.

The book tells the story from Raavan's perspective, giving readers a fresh and intriguing take on the character. Raavan is portrayed as a complex character with both positive and negative traits. He is depicted as a fierce warrior, brilliant scholar, ruthless businessman, powerful king, artist, musician, and statesman all rolled into one. The book sheds light on Raavan's life, starting from his childhood and chronicling his journey until the time he kidnaps Sita. Raavan is shown to be a man of contrasts, with brutal violence and scholarly knowledge. He is a man who will love without reward and kill without remorse. The novel attempts to put Raavan into perspective and does not mean to whitewash his sins and evil deeds. Rather, it portrays him as a human being with flaws and virtues. The writer here aims to re-imagine evil in ways that had not been explored before and to create a more nuanced portrayal of Raavan that would resonate with modern readers. The book has been praised for its racy and well-paced narrative, as well as its emotional depth and complexity.

Another book under consideration is "Ramayana: The Game of Life" (2017) is a book series written by Shubha Vilas which offers a contemporary retelling of Ramayana, one of the ancient Sanatan (Hindu) epics. The series presents the timeless wisdom and teachings from Ramayana in a modern context, aiming to guide navigating various aspects of life. It explores the theme of dharma in a modern retelling of Ramayana. The series focuses on the teachings of Lord Rama and how they can be applied to everyday life. The books emphasize the importance of following one's dharma, or duty, and making the right choices in life. The author uses footnotes to explain the meaning of certain words and phrases, making the books accessible to readers of all ages. The series also highlights the importance of family, loyalty, and sacrifice. As such it is a well-written and engaging series that provides readers with a deeper understanding of dharma and its significance in Indian mythology.

The series consists of multiple books, each focusing on different aspects of Ramayana story and its relevance to everyday life. Shubha Vilas explores the characters, events, and lessons from Ramayana, extracting practical insights and moral teachings that readers can apply to their own lives. The series includes:

"Rise of the Sun Prince", introduces the major characters and sets the stage for Ramayana narrative. It explores the early life of Lord Rama, his qualities, and his journey to becoming the prince of Ayodhya.

"Shattered Dreams", the book delves into the challenges faced by Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana during their exile in the forest. It examines the choices they make, the adversities they overcome, and the lessons they learn along the way.

"The Forest of Enchantments", this book shifts the perspective to Sita, offering a feminist retelling of Ramayana from her point of view. It explores Sita's thoughts, emotions, and experiences, providing a deeper understanding of her character and the complexities of her role in the epic.

"The Lanka Princess", this book focuses on the latter part of Ramayana, including the abduction of Sita by Ravana, the subsequent war, and the ultimate triumph of good over evil. It delves into the lessons of loyalty, valour, and righteousness.

"Eternal Love", this book explores the deeper spiritual teachings and lessons from Ramayana, emphasizing the power of love, devotion, and self-realization. It delves into the divine aspects of the epic and its significance beyond the physical events.

The Game of Life signifies that life is not a story but a way of life, and it is a game full of twists and turns at every stage. The book aims to demonstrate how the ancient epic holds immediate relevance to modern life and how it arms us with valuable tools to deal with anomalies in our lives. The book highlights that life should not be predictable and smooth, and we face stress, hard times, and challenges. The author uses the title to emphasize that life is a constant reminder that nothing, however powerful in one moment, is permanent.

Consequently, the book presents the ancient epic in a contemporary and relatable manner, aiming to help readers gain insights into various aspects of life, including relationships, leadership, decision-making, and personal growth. The series seeks to bridge the gap between ancient wisdom and modern challenges, offering guidance for individuals seeking a moral compass and a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them. The characters no doubt are from the original Ramayana but the author reimagined and developed them with depth, complexity and modern interpretation. While staying true to the essence of the original characters, Vilas offers a contemporary understanding of their motivations, emotions, and dilemmas. He delves deeper into their psychological and emotional states, providing a more nuanced portrayal that resonates with modern readers. It seems that the author here aims to make the characters and their journeys relatable and applicable to the challenges and dilemmas faced by individuals in today's world. He brings out the timeless wisdom and teachings of Ramayana, adapting them to present-day contexts and making them accessible to readers.

As such, the modern touch in Vilas's interpretation can be seen in the way he explores the characters' inner conflicts, emphasizes their personal growth, and highlights their relevance in contemporary life. He aims to extract practical lessons from their experiences and present them in a way that readers can understand and apply to their own lives. Wherever Vilas adds his own insights and interpretations, he does so with reverence for the original epic and its characters. The essence and values associated with the characters remain intact, but their development is presented through a lens that resonates with the modern reader.

On the whole, the "Ramayana: The Game of Life" series strikes a balance between honouring the original characters of Ramayana and providing a fresh perspective that speaks to the challenges and aspirations of contemporary individuals. The author's modern touch aims to facilitate a deeper understanding and personal connection with the characters and their journeys while staying true to the timeless wisdom of the epic. For example in the series, Vilas explores the character of Hanuman in a way that highlights his inner journey and spiritual growth. While the original Ramayana portrays Hanuman as a mighty warrior and devotee

of Lord Rama, Vilas adds a modern touch by delving into Hanuman's self-discovery and self-realization. Vilas portrays Hanuman as a character who initially identifies himself solely as a servant and warrior. However, as the series progresses, Hanuman begins to question his identity and purpose beyond his physical capabilities. He embarks on a personal journey of self-discovery, seeking a deeper understanding of his own spiritual potential. Through various encounters and dialogues, Vilas shows Hanuman's transformation from a fierce and loyal warrior to a seeker of spiritual wisdom. Hanuman grapples with questions of self-worth, purpose, and his relationship with the divine. Vilas presents Hanuman as a character who goes beyond his physical strength and develops a profound spiritual connection with Lord Rama. This modern interpretation of Hanuman's character allows readers to relate to the process of self-exploration and the search for higher meaning in their own lives. It highlights the relevance of spiritual growth and self-realization in the contemporary context, encouraging readers to reflect on their journeys and the potential for inner transformation. By presenting Hanuman's character in this way, Vilas adds a contemporary depth and relatability to the beloved character from Ramayana, bridging the gap between the ancient epic and the modern reader's quest for meaning and purpose in life.

Another novel under consideration is "Sita: Warrior of Mithila" by Amish Tripathi, (2017) presenting Sita as a warrior princess and explores her journey, bravery, and strength. The book is the second instalment in his "Ram Chandra Series" and presents a fresh and compelling perspective on the character of Sita from Ramayana. Here Amish Tripathi takes the well-known character of Sita and transforms her into a warrior princess. The story begins with young Sita's early years and traces her journey as she discovers her destiny and embraces her role as a protector of the realm of Mithila. The book delves into Sita's upbringing, her martial training, and the challenges she faces as she becomes an influential and respected figure in the kingdom. The author portrays Sita as a compassionate leader who cares deeply for her people and strives to uphold justice and righteousness.

In this novel the writer employs a simple and engaging writing style, making the book accessible to readers of different ages and backgrounds. He effectively combines mythological elements with vivid descriptions of battles, landscapes, and emotions, immersing readers in the world of Mithila. The narrative is fast-paced, filled with action, and keeps the readers hooked throughout the book. As such through the book the writer offers a unique interpretation of Ramayana, challenging traditional notions of gender roles and expectations. He presents Sita as an embodiment of feminine strength, defying societal norms and carving her own path. The book also explores themes of gender equality, leadership, sacrifice, and the complexities of power, prompting readers to question established notions of femininity and heroism. The book as such is different from other contemporary re-visions of the story of Sita, as it portrays Sita as a fierce warrior, well-trained in combat and warfare, rather than a coy, timid princess. This is a departure from traditional portrayals of Sita in popular culture. The book also explores the kind of mental strength and agility it must have taken for Sita to deal with the challenges she faced. Simultaneously the book focuses on the power of women and portrays Sita as an independent, brave, and self-righteous woman who becomes the prime minister of Mithila. Most of the characters are shown to be of the firm opinion that women can carry out the same tasks as any man.

The book is also analyzed as a representative voice of Bhartiya (Indian) feminism rooted in Sanatan (Hindu) tradition as different from Western theories of feminism. The portrait stands out from other contemporary re-visions of the story of Sita by portraying her as a warrior, focusing on mental strength and agility, promoting women's empowerment, and offering an Indian feminist approach. Simultaneously the book's relevance lies in its ability to connect the ancient tale of Ramayana with contemporary concerns and aspirations. Tripathi successfully infuses relevant socio-political commentary into the narrative, making it relatable to modern readers. By reimagining Sita as a warrior, the author provides a strong role model for women, encouraging them to embrace their strengths and defy societal limitations.

The book is analyzed as a representative voice of Indian feminism rooted in Indian tradition, exploring how the image of Sita implicates the Bhartiya (Indian) feminist approach as different from Western theories of feminism. No doubt, feminism in Bharat (India) is not a Western import, it is as old as Sanatan (Hindu) Civilization. It is rooted in ancient cultural traditions, scriptures, and the existence of empowered women throughout Indian history. While the feminist movement in Bharat (India) has been influenced by Western ideas, it has evolved to incorporate indigenous perspectives, addressing the unique challenges faced by women in Indian society. Feminism in Bharat (India) represents a complex interplay between traditional values and contemporary social activism, reflecting the ongoing struggle for gender equality and women's rights.

Sanatan (Hindu) society has a long history of advocating for gender equality and women's rights, dating back to ancient times. In ancient Bharat (Indian) scriptures and texts, such as the Vedas and Upanishads, there are instances of women scholars and philosophers who participated in intellectual and spiritual discourses. These women, known as rishikas, played a significant role in shaping philosophical and religious thought. Ancient Sanatan (Hindu) epics and legends depict strong and empowered female characters. Ramayana and Mahabharata, two of the most prominent Indian epics, feature women like Sita, Draupadi, and

Kunti, who exhibited qualities of courage, resilience, and agency. These characters, although sometimes constrained by societal norms, demonstrated their strength and ability to navigate challenging circumstances.

Women empowerment is another significant theme addressed in this novel, as it presents Sita as a strong, independent woman who defies traditional gender roles. She challenges societal expectations and norms, emerging as a skilled warrior and leader in her own right. Sita's character encourages readers to question and break free from the limitations imposed on women, highlighting their potential for leadership and power. Her journey empowers women to embrace their true capabilities and strive for equality in a patriarchal society. As such the theme of equality is intricately woven into the fabric of the novel. Sita's partnership with Ram serves as a powerful example of an equal and balanced relationship. Their decisions are made jointly, and their responsibilities are shared, emphasizing the importance of mutual respect and cooperation. The novel challenges the traditional hierarchy that often marginalizes women, advocating for a more egalitarian society where both genders are afforded equal opportunities and recognition.

Sita's character is portrayed as a scholar and an avid reader, emphasizing the significance of knowledge and learning. Her thirst for knowledge symbolizes the power of education in breaking societal barriers and empowering individuals. Through her journey, the novel highlights the importance of educational opportunities for all, irrespective of gender or social background, to foster personal growth and contribute to societal progress. Crime and justice form another vital theme explored in the novel. It delves into the prevalence of criminal activities, corruption, and the influence of power-hungry individuals. Sita's quest to fight against crime reflects the need for justice, accountability, and the establishment of a more just society. The novel serves as a reminder of the importance of upholding the rule of law and working towards a society where all individuals can live free from the fear of crime and injustice.

The novel also effectively reflects broader societal issues in Bharat (India) through its exploration of poverty, mental strength, women empowerment, equality, education, and crime. By weaving these themes into the narrative, the novel provides valuable insights and perspectives on these pressing issues, urging readers to critically examine and address them in their own lives and society at large. Well, one potential critique of the book is that some readers may find the character of Sita deviating too far from the traditional portrayal in the original Ramayana. While Tripathi's interpretation adds depth and agency to Sita's character, it may not resonate with those who prefer a more conventional representation. But as the book is a captivating and thought-provoking read. Amish Tripathi's reimagining of Sita as a warrior princess challenges conventional narratives, presenting a compelling and empowering version of a beloved character. The book successfully blends tradition, history, and imagination, making it an engaging choice for readers interested in Indian tradition and contemporary retellings of ancient epics.

As such Amish Tripathi was motivated to write the novel for several reasons and one of the primary motivations was to challenge the prevailing narratives surrounding Sita, a prominent character from the Sanatan (Indian) epic, Ramayana. In traditional retellings, Sita is often portrayed as a passive and submissive character, overshadowed by her husband, Lord Ram. Amish Tripathi wanted to present Sita as a powerful and independent figure, capable of leading and making her own choices. Another motivation for Tripathi was to address societal issues and promote social change through his storytelling. By reimagining Sita's story as a warrior, Tripathi aimed to challenge stereotypes and inspire readers, especially women, to break free from societal constraints and pursue their aspirations. Tripathi's fascination with tradition and his desire to make ancient Sanatan (Hindu) epics more accessible to a modern audience also played a role in his motivation to write the novel. He wanted to retell these stories in a way that resonated with contemporary readers, infusing them with fresh perspectives and making them relatable to current societal issues.

Another fascinating novel "The Palace of Illusions" (2008) by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni which retells the Hindu epic Mahabharata from the perspective of Draupadi, also known as Panchaali. The novel follows Panchaali's life, from her birth from fire to her marriage to the five Pandava brothers, her exile in the wilderness, and her role in instigating a catastrophic war. The novel also explores themes of gender, power, and agency in a patriarchal society. No doubt the novel has received positive reviews for its unique perspective on the epic and its engaging storytelling. Here Divakaruni skillfully breathes new life into this ancient epic, giving voice to one of its most intriguing and complex characters.

The novel takes us on a journey through Draupadi's life, starting from her birth from the sacred fire and following her through the trials and tribulations she faces as a woman living in a patriarchal society. Divakaruni's writing effortlessly transports readers to the affluent palaces, vibrant battlefields, and mystical realms of Mahabharata, painting a vivid and evocative picture of the world in which Draupadi resides. What sets this novel apart is how Draupadi's voice is given prominence. Divakaruni skillfully portrays her as a multi-dimensional character, with hopes, dreams, desires, and flaws. Draupadi's fierce spirit, intelligence, and unwavering determination shine through the pages, making her a relatable and inspiring protagonist.

Divakaruni's prose is lyrical and poetic, capturing the essence of Mahabharata while infusing it with her own unique style. The narrative is rich with emotions, weaving together love, friendship, betrayal, and sacrifice. The author delves deep into Draupadi's emotional landscape, exploring her relationships with the other characters, such as her fiery bond with Krishna and her complex connections with the Pandavas. Furthermore, the novel challenges traditional interpretations of Mahabharata by offering a fresh perspective on Draupadi's story. Divakaruni explores themes of gender, power dynamics, and societal expectations, shedding light on the complexities of Draupadi's experiences as a woman trapped within the confines of a male-dominated world.

The novel no doubt is a beautifully crafted novel that seamlessly blends history, mythology, tradition and feminist perspectives. Divakaruni's masterful storytelling and deep understanding of Mahabharata make this novel a compelling read for both fans of the epic and newcomers alike. It is a testament to the enduring power of ancient tales and the importance of diverse voices in retelling them. The book is a must-read for anyone interested in Mahabharata or tradition in general. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's skilful writing, vivid imagery, and nuanced portrayal of Draupadi make this retelling a true gem. It is a tale of love, sacrifice, and resilience that will leave readers enthralled and inspired long after the final page is turned.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni wrote "The Palace of Illusions" intending to provide a fresh perspective on Mahabharata by focusing on the character of Draupadi. As such, Mahabharata is a vast and complex epic with numerous characters and intricate storylines, and Divakaruni was drawn to Draupadi's narrative and wanted to explore it in depth. As such one of the motivations behind writing this novel was to give a voice to Draupadi. In addition to portraying Draupadi's story, Divakaruni also aimed to challenge collective norms and address issues of gender, power, and identity. By placing Draupadi at the centre of the narrative, the author shines a light on the struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society, and the constraints imposed upon them.

On the whole, Divakaruni's purpose in writing "The Palace of Illusions" was to breathe new life into the ancient epic, offer a fresh perspective on Draupadi's story, and explore the themes and complexities of Mahabharata through the lens of a powerful and often misunderstood female character. This novel is an important work of literature as it gives voice to Draupadi, a prominent but often overlooked character in Mahabharata. By centring the narrative on Draupadi's perspective, Divakaruni challenges the traditionally male-centric interpretations of the epic. This shift in perspective allows readers to explore the story from a fresh and feminist viewpoint, highlighting the experiences, emotions, and struggles of a complex female character. Secondly, Divakaruni's retelling demonstrates the power of reimagining mythology and tradition for contemporary audiences. By infusing the ancient epic with her own storytelling style, she bridges the gap between past and present, making Mahabharata accessible and relevant to modern readers. In this way, she opens up new possibilities for engaging with and interpreting ancient texts, breathing new life into eternal tales.

Well, "The Palace of Illusions" tackles themes that continue to resonate today, such as gender roles, power dynamics, love, ambition, and identity. Divakaruni's exploration of these themes within the context of Mahabharata encourages readers to reflect on their own lives and society. It prompts discussions on the complexities of human relationships, societal expectations, and the choices individuals make in the face of adversity. As such, Mahabharata holds immense cultural and historical importance in Indian tradition and literature. Divakaruni's novel adds to the ongoing legacy of retellings, adaptations, and interpretations of this epic. By engaging with Mahabharata, "The Palace of Illusions" contributes to the preservation and dissemination of this significant cultural heritage, making it accessible to a wider audience. The novel also challenges traditional interpretations, gives voice to a marginalized character, explores relevant themes, contributes to cultural heritage and showcases literary craftsmanship. It offers a thought-provoking and engaging experience for readers, bridging the gap between ancient mythology, tradition and contemporary storytelling.

Accordingly the engagement of contemporary literature with the ancient Indian epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, has led to a transformative and diverse range of narratives. Through modern adaptations and retellings, these timeless tales have been reimagined to serve multiple purposes in the present day. The works discussed in this article, namely "Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta" by Amish Tripathi, "Ramayana: The Game of Life" by Shubha Vilas, "Sita: Warrior of Mithila" by Amish Tripathi, and "The Palace of Illusions" by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, highlight the rich tapestry of contemporary literature's engagement with the epics. These authors have successfully breathed new life into these ancient stories, presenting fresh perspectives, exploring complex characters, and addressing relevant themes.

Through their narratives, these works not only entertain but also invite readers to reflect on the timeless wisdom and ethical dilemmas presented in Ramayana and Mahabharata. They serve as a bridge between the past and the present, connecting readers to the cultural heritage and literary legacy of ancient Bharat (India). Moreover, these contemporary retellings offer a space for dialogue and interpretation, inviting readers to engage with these epics in a more accessible and relatable manner. They demonstrate the continued relevance and enduring power of

Ramayana and Mahabharata in shaping our understanding of human nature, relationships, and societal dynamics.

Overall, contemporary literature's engagement with Ramayana and Mahabharata showcases the evolution of these ancient epics into modern narratives that captivate, challenge and inspire. Through their imaginative reinterpretations, these works contribute to the ongoing legacy of these foundational texts, ensuring their continued relevance and resonance in the ever-changing literary landscape. As such contemporary literature has engaged with and reimagined the ancient Sanatan (Hindu) epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, in diverse and innovative ways. The transformative journey of these timeless tales from their traditional forms to modern narratives has served several purposes and most significantly these modern narratives have helped to keep these ancient epics relevant and accessible to contemporary audiences while also providing new insights into their timeless themes.

REFERENCES

1. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/books/review-raavan-the-enemy-of-aryavarta-is-a-love-story-for-india-s-masses-1.887911>
2. <https://zeezest.com/culture/interview-with-amish-tripathi-on-raavan-enemy-of-aryavarta-zee-zest-339>
3. <https://openhemagazine.com/lounge/books/the-allure-of-the-anti-hero/>
4. <https://www.jaydepparmar.in/2019/07/raavan-enemy-of-aryavarta-review-and.html?m=1>
5. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/books/amish-tripathi-s-sita-warrior-of-mithila-here-s-all-you-need-to-know/story-dyvb68C1w7RqyhKeRWjOKJ.html>
6. https://ijels.com/upload_document/issue_files/21IJELS-107202226-Indian.pdf